

## *Family Ties*

*November 29, 2011*

There's a passage where the Buddha comments on how it's hard to meet someone who's never been your mother or your father, your sister or your brother, your son or your daughter in all the many lifetimes we've had. Now in some forms of Buddhism, they take that as a reflection for developing goodwill and compassion for everybody. But in the original teaching, the Buddha used it for another purpose entirely. He said thinking about that should give rise to a desire to gain release. In other words, enough of all this!

I've been working on a translation of the *Udana*, which is a set of texts around the Buddha's exclamations. And he never exclaims about how wonderful family relationships are. They're always a cause for sorrow, given the fact that they have to end at some point. There's one passage where Lady Visakha's coming from the funeral of one of her grandchildren, and the Buddha asks her, "Would you like to have as many grandchildren as are here in this city of Savatthi?" And she says, "Oh yes, that would be wonderful."

Then he asks her, "How many people die in any given day in Savatthi?" She says, "Oh, sometimes there are ten people dying, sometimes nine, or eight, or at least one every day. There's never a day without somebody dying." He says, "If you had that many grandchildren, would there ever be a day where you weren't going to a funeral?" And she says, "Okay, enough of that wish to have that many grandchildren!"

But beyond the simple fact that relationships end, there's a lot of struggle in the meantime. As long as we live in a sensual realm, the Buddha said, there are going to be fights between parents and children, brothers and sisters, brothers and brothers, sisters and sisters, and between the parents themselves. This is something you've got to accept.

There are two ways you can try to get past those quarrels. One is through reconciliation; the other's through forgiveness. Now, reconciliation requires that everybody involved wants to patch up the relationship. Whoever's acted harmfully has to admit that he or she has acted harmfully and to promise never to do it again—and has to make the promise in such a way that the other side believes it, or at least is determined to continue with the relationship. In other words, you share common values about what's right and wrong, what's proper and improper. As for the person wronged, he or she has to behave in a way that shows respect for the other side.

Reconciliation is a lot of work, and it requires that both sides want it. This is where you run up against one of the frustrating parts about living with human beings. One person will wrong another and not even admit that it was wrong. They'll complain that the other person is not being compassionate—or a whole list of other ways that people try to get around a genuine reconciliation. So if you find yourself in a situation where you can't get reconciled, then you have to simply forgive the other side, i.e., not try to get back at them. And leave it at that. In other words, the relationship is never going to be healed until both sides are ready to do the work of reconciliation. In the meantime, you have to live with an unhealed relationship, or try to break it off. This is one of the limitations of being in the human world, the limitations of being a parent, a sibling, or a child.

So as I said, the Buddha never exclaims over how wonderful family relationships are. His main exclamation around family life is just about how much suffering there is—how burdensome we can be with one another—and it's one of those reflections that's very useful when you sit down to meditate. Realize you can't find happiness out there. It's got to be in here. Sometimes, no matter how good you are, no matter how compassionate you are, there are people you cannot help. In fact, they sometimes respond to your compassion with even more vehemence and violence.

It's this kind of reflection that drove the Buddha to say, "There must be another way to find happiness. There must be an alternative." It's why he left his family. And it's why he extolled seclusion, because the real problem, of course, is within each human mind. The reason we can't get along is because we can't get along well with our own minds. We're all sloshing around in our greed, aversion, and delusion. And there's nothing you can really do about other people's greed, aversion, and delusion—especially if you haven't dealt with your own.

So you focus here where the work can be done and, at the very least, you can be a good example to others to show that it is possible to train the mind. It is possible to step back from your own greed and learn how not to identify with it, and the same with your aversion and your delusion. This is where the important work is.

Now this is a value that goes against domestic values, not only in our society, but in every human society. We're always told that happiness lies in the family. Your worth lies in your family. But the Buddha's message was: No, your happiness can't depend on your relationship with other people, even your closest relatives. It has to depend on the skills you develop within your own mind.

He does recognize that we have a debt to our parents. And the frequency with which he says that indicates that parents in those days weren't all wonderful people. Some parents are really toxic. As he said, some parents have no virtue, no

generosity, no conviction, and no discernment. And your way to repay them is not just to hang around and do everything they tell you. You try to find some way of inducing them to be generous if you can, more virtuous if you can. The “if you can” here is important. Sometimes you realize you can’t do that. Parents are very sensitive to being taught by their children. But if, through your practice, you can show that you are a better human being—more solid, more reliable, steadier—then maybe they’ll pick up something from that.

But you can’t pin your hopes on that. Again and again, the Buddha talks about how, if you want to have a good influence on other people, first you have to make yourself a good example. This is why we meditate, because everything you do and say and think comes out of the qualities of the mind. And these qualities can be trained. You can learn to be more alert, more mindful, more focused, more discerning, to develop greater powers of endurance.

So when the Buddha talks about being a warrior, this is where the battle is fought—because this is where you can do the most good. Sometimes we think that a warrior is someone who is willing to take on any battle and doesn’t admit to any weakness. But that’s not the true warrior. The true warrior knows that there are certain areas where he or she just cannot have any hope of winning. So those are the battles you don’t take on. You have to choose your battles with an eye of having some hope of winning—and some sense that winning will actually be worth the effort.

The battle of straightening out your family: If you realize that you can’t do it, then you have to admit that it’s not a battle you can win. It’s a huge waste of time. And often, the battle just pulls you down.

Your real battle is right here, dealing with your own defilements, straightening out your own mind. So try to keep your energies focused here, because this is where they can bring about victory—the kind of victory that really counts.